

How to avoid super-spirituality

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0 : 00] This talk, as you can see there, Rights, Freedoms and Obligations.! Seems to me the topic that Paul is dealing with generally in these chapters,! and I've subtitled it, How to Avoid Superspirituality.

I think Superspirituality was a term coined by Francis Schaeffer, I believe. If you haven't come across it, I'll define it briefly, shortly.

But I couldn't resist putting up this rhyme. This was written many years ago, actually, but it seems remarkably modern, doesn't it? If only the good were the clever, if only the clever were good, the world would be better than ever we thought that it possibly could.

But alas, it is seldom or never that either behave as they should, for the good are so harsh to the clever, and the clever so rude to the good. It's all too true, isn't it?

We all have rights, don't we? Even animals have rights. Why do I say that? Well, Paul quotes one here, doesn't he, from the Book of Deuteronomy. He says, do not muzzle an ox while it's treading out the grain.

[1 : 05] Even an ox has the right not to be treated cruelly by the farmer, to be allowed to eat as it works. It's not a machine, it shouldn't be treated as such.

And as Paul says, if that's even true of oxen, how much more is that true for humans? But every society has a tension, doesn't it, between the rights of the individual and the individual's responsibility to the community.

That's a tension that our country is very conscious of at the moment, I think. If you go too far in one direction, and you get totalitarianism, the government tells everybody what to do, and nobody has any rights at all.

To go far in the other direction, and we get moral anarchy. People just do what they want to do and don't care about anybody else. And the community actually ceased to exist in any real sense at all. So we find our politicians are now so scared of infringing rights that they refuse to admit any duty to behave responsibly, and then they have to legislate to stop the community disintegrating, and so all our rights are actually lost.

[2 : 18] Rights of free speech and so on are rapidly being eroded. Because there is an issue there. If you won't talk about people's responsibilities as well as their rights, you're bound to run into trouble.

But this is true in the church also. If the church starts telling people what they should wear, and what they should eat, and who they should marry, or where to go, or if to go on holiday, well, we have a word, don't we, for that sort of church.

We call it a cult, and rightly so. The church shouldn't have such total control over our lives. But we saw in the previous chapter, in chapter 7, which was on sexual morality, that if the church tolerates any behaviour in the name of Christian freedom, then the community is on a fast track to destruction.

Sorry, I meant to move the slide on. Paul has some comments on female modesty in chapter 11, in fact.

But we won't go into that now. The kingdom of God is meant to be the model of the perfect society, the spiritual nation. And to do that, to be that, it does have to resolve this tension between the rights of the individual and the responsibilities to the community and to the king.

[3 : 55] But Paul actually points out that when we do this, we actually come up against another tension as well. He says, now, this is 1 Corinthians 8, verses 1 to 3, about food sacrificed to idols.

We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is

known by God.

The argument that's being used here runs more or less like this. It says that idols are just made of wood, aren't they? I mean, the whole point about an idol, all the way through the Old Testament, it says that, well, they've got eyes and mouth and feet, but they don't see or speak or run.

Idols can't do anything. They're just made of wood. So if you offer food to an idol, is the food contaminated by the idol? Well, no, because the idol can't do anything. So there's no harm in eating it, is there?

That's the argument. And in fact, Paul doesn't dismiss this out of hand. He says in verse 4, we know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. So he says, yes, there is some weight behind this argument.

[5 : 03] But he says, that's not the whole story because there's the effect on fellow believers. And indeed, though he doesn't say this, there's also implicitly the effect on our own conscience as well.

Because, I've lost the actual verse now. Yeah, it wasn't that one I was actually looking for.

It says that the food for that brother is defiled, but never mind. So although the idol itself doesn't defile the food, the weak conscience of another believer, it can be defiled for them because they think of it as being issued to idols.

Yeah, yeah, verse 7. Well, verse 7 was what I was looking at. At the end of verse 7, it said it is defiled because their conscience is weak. The food is defiled by the idol, even though the idol itself doesn't do anything at all.

It's just a bit of wood. So it's not as simple as that. And Paul also raises this tension between knowledge and love. But you have to be careful here, of course, when Paul's talking about knowledge.

[6 : 23] He is talking particularly about the sort of knowledge, that Gnosticism, which was the main problem for the Corinthians. Knowledge, which is esoteric knowledge, knowledge that is denied to other believers, who are therefore second class.

Paul is not actually against knowledge. In fact, he talks here in 9, verse 1. He says, not 9, verse 1, but he says, you know, he talks about things we know later on.

So we do know things, of course, and knowledge is important. In fact, he says in Romans 10, verse 2, he says, the Israelites are zeal, it's not based on knowledge.

If you have zeal that's not based on knowledge, then it's fanaticism. So it's not that Paul is anti-knowledge, it's the particular type of knowledge and way of using knowledge that is being talked about here.

And so Francis Schaeffer actually coined that term super-spirituality. And what I think he meant by it was those attitudes and activities were used to make us look more spiritual than fellow believers, to say that we're the super-Christians.

[7 : 32] Now, maybe not even do that deliberately, but actually to do it implicitly, which in a sense is almost worse, to think that by involving some particular activity or having some particular knowledge, then we're being super-spiritual and more spiritual than the rest of the people of God.

I think Schaeffer was talking particularly about the abuse of the gifts of the Spirit, which Paul does go on to talk about later. But of course you can do it in all sorts of other ways.

The Corinthians were doing it by knowledge, and we can do that, can't we? We can parade our knowledge of some obscure, not very important item of matter of doctrine that somehow makes us more, makes us superior, more spiritual than those who don't really understand that stuff.

Or indeed, you can even do it by praying. I mean, Jesus warned about those who, those pagans who think that praying is a matter of lots of words, didn't he?

He says, you know, you can, I timed it, you can recite the Lord's Prayer in less than 30 seconds.

The, as we did this morning, it's not the, you know, you can appear to be super-spiritual, can't you, by having very long prayer meetings.

[8 : 51] And of course, for extra brownie points, you hold them before 6 o'clock in the morning. And then it's doubly spiritual then. Now, of course, don't get me wrong, of course there are times when the Church needs to do exactly that, to spend long hours in prayer sometimes.

And indeed, the best time to do it, may be at 6 o'clock in the morning before the world has woken up. But it becomes super-spiritual when we think that somehow by doing that, God's more likely to listen to us if we pray for 3 hours starting at 4 o'clock and if we pray for one hour starting at 11 o'clock.

It ain't so. And Jesus said, you know, God knows what you want before you start praying. Prayer is almost for your benefit rather than God's, so that you know what God wants.

And, I mean, he does say more than that. The prayer itself is part of God carrying out his will. But, yeah, we can even use things like prayer, which of course are very important in the Christian life, to make ourselves seem super-spiritual.

I once boycotted, it was only meant as a joke, actually, but I was once at a meeting when they said it was going to be a 7 o'clock prayer meeting for the extra-spiritual, and it was only meant as a joke, of course, but I actually boycotted it for that reason.

[10:16] Now, but actually, so that's the first question, actually. Do we use knowledge or love? Now, Paul is actually going to deal with this in much more detail later in 1 Corinthians 13, a famous passage on love.

So let's just take his lead and make a few immediate observations on this rather than go too deeply into this tension. But we have to acknowledge there is this tension here. So Paul is certainly not decrying reasoning.

I mean, I've already said that our zeal has to be according to knowledge, otherwise it becomes fanaticism. And in fact, Paul's whole approach to these questions here, both of the food offered to idols and in chapter 9 of how much we pay our preachers, is based on rational analysis, isn't it? He's not saying, you know, I tell you this is the way it works, you better believe it. He doesn't do that. He says, no, just guys, think this through. Just think it through properly.

Don't jump to conclusions. Don't be prejudiced, as we might say. Just think it through. And then, and so he does say, we know an idol is nothing at all in the world and there is no God but one.

[11:28] And similarly in chapter 9, it's a reasoned argument. But he goes on to say that the analysis that he's doing must be based on love and the need to build up community.

So this weak brother for whom Christ died is destroyed by your knowledge. So perhaps just to say, Paul deals with this in much more detail in 1 Corinthians 13, but perhaps we could just summarise that here by saying what we need is not knowledge or love, but knowledge that is tempered by love and love that is guided by reason.

Oh dear, I just realised I've forgotten to mark when I change slides in my notes. I don't know if it's from now on anyway. That's slide three. I think I need to change now. Oh, come on.

So what is the key issue here? What should we be focusing on? Is it freedom or is it responsibility to the community? So let's, I thought, well actually probably food offered to idols is not too much of a problem in the UK.

It might be if you lived in India or various other places in the Far East, but probably not here. So what other issues, similar issues might there be that are of similar perhaps importance?

[12:51] Well, one of them of course is raised by Paul in chapter 9. How much, how do we pay our preachers or do we pay our preachers? But let me think about one or two other things that we might come up against. Well, the three I thought you might think about is alcoholic drink, cosmetic products and good food.

Now all those things are things that are commended by God. In fact, they're all commended by God in one verse. Psalm 104, verse 15, which says the following.

You can look it up if you like, but I'll read it. It's very short. He talks about, well it's a whole list of the gifts that God gives to man, but in verse 15 of Psalm 104 it says, wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face, shine, so you ladies are all white with rubbing oil into your face, and bread that sustains his heart.

So he's not just talking about a crumb of crusty bread, he's obviously talking about something that sustains and gladdens the heart. He's talking about good food. All these things he's saying are gifts that God has given.

But they're all capable of abuse and so they need to be handled with care. How do we go about this? Is it more important to assert the freedom to enjoy the things God has given or is it better to err on the side of caution and to avoid anything open to abuse?

[14:23] Now the trouble is of course that the church has zigzagged between these two opinions throughout its history and certainly in the 20th century. you get one point Christians had to wear a suit don't smoke don't drink don't dance don't go to the pictures wear a suit and you're alright.

And then you think it sort of goes to the other extreme of ridiculous libertarianism. So what should we be focusing on?

Well actually Paul's quite clear on this. He says actually we need to do both. we need to emphasise both freedom and responsibility.

Because if you fail to do either there are serious consequences. And so in chapter 9 verse 5 he says he will absolutely defend the right of Peter to travel with his family.

He says he will absolutely defend the right of the apostles and preachers to earn their living from the gospel. In fact that's a fundamental freedom that applies to men and even oxen.

[15 : 34] That you should profit from your own labour. And he gives lots of examples doesn't he? Does a soldier serve at his own expense?

Do you plant a vineyard and not eat of the grapes? Do you tend a flock and not drink of the milk? And he says doesn't the law say the same thing?

You shouldn't even muzzle an ox when it's treading out the vineyard or treading out the grain it isn't it? When the ox is treading out the grain.

We are created in the image of God and we are created to work to subdue the earth and as part of that we are expected to profit from that labour. This is a fundamental right, human right.

I think it is one of the human rights, the right to have work and that's true, it is. We should have the right to have work and to profit from the work we do, otherwise we are slaves.

[16 : 35] It's only a slave that doesn't profit from his own labour. And that's what God did, doesn't it? It says God saw everything that he was made and behold it was very good. And the seventh day God ended his work which he made and rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.

God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it. Of course in that he had rested from his work which God created and made. So God sat down and said yes, that's good, I've done a good job there and I'm going to take satisfaction and pleasure from that job.

He was expecting a reward from the work he'd done. God himself does that. He says that's the work I've done and I'm going to take pleasure and profit from it. But equally there may be reasons not to exercise that right because Paul doesn't want the gospel to be valued in pounds and pence. Actually it's catch 22 isn't it? Remember catch 22? The only way you can get removed from a combat zone is if you can prove you're insane.

But the desire to be removed from the combat zone is very strong evidence of your sanity. That was catch 22 the whole book about that of course.

[17 : 53] You can't it's the same here isn't it? We don't want that the gospel is given freely it's something that God gives and we don't want to charge pounds, shillings and pence for it or drachmas and denarii or whatever the local currency was.

It should be given freely. But at the same on the other hand of course if you offer it freely that seems to imply that it isn't worth anything. If it's to be off if it is a work of God to be labouring in the gospel then the labourer should profit from it.

It's a thing that we always struggle with in the deacons and church meetings how much do we pay the fill and it's perhaps right that we should struggle with it because we need to remember that we shouldn't even muzzle an ox and he treads out the grain that it's an absolute right to profit to live by the gospel if he preaches the gospel.

It's an absolute right and yet the gospel has to be given freely. So sorry I didn't mean to go let's go back again yeah so what Paul says here is that in fact you have to assert both you have to assert the freedoms that we have in Christ and you have to assert Christian freedom because if not it's to turn us into slaves and make nonsense of the kingdom of God yet at the same time you don't have to exercise that freedom this is where I think we differ from the world isn't it because implicit in everything the world says about freedom is not that you have this right but you actually have to exercise it except when it comes to voting for some reason you have a right to vote but you don't have to exercise that but everything else you do that's implicit isn't it it's implicit in a lot of feminist logic it's implicit in a lot of egalitarian arguments that you have these rights and therefore you jolly well better make use of them but Paul says no somehow sometimes it's better not to make use of them and he gives this example if anyone with a weak conscience sees you of this knowledge eating in an idol's temple won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols so this weak brother for whom

Christ died is destroyed by your knowledge when you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience you sin against Christ therefore if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin I will never eat meat again so that I will not cause him to fall and in fact both parties here

really are indulging in that spiritual one-upmanship that super spirituality one is saying look I'm strong I don't have to worry about food to idols I can eat this it won't do me any harm at all look how spiritually strong I am and the other is saying no no you're being licentious you're being idolatrous and I'm judging you because of that both of them are judging each other actually aren't they and that is what Paul said we shouldn't be doing but he does say that if I cause my brother to fall into sin I'll never eat meat again not just

[21 : 44] I won't eat meat that's been offered to idols I'll turn vegetarian if that's going to stop my brother falling into sin we had a long discussion when Sarah and Oddbier were here about the use of alcohol actually and Oddbier noted how different it is in the West he says that in Switzerland Sarah would drink a glass of wine with a family meal and similarly it's true in this country people drink a glass of wine and it doesn't necessarily lead to alcoholism but he says that there is such a problem with alcoholism in Mongolian society even within the Mongolian churches that when people have said well the Bible does say that wine gladdens the heart of men we can't ban it and yet there's been such a problem with alcoholism even within the Mongolian churches that they have decided that when they were in Mongolia they're teetotal saying we have a freedom to drink wine but we're going to give it up because we don't want to trump that much greater freedom that the brethren have to follow

Christ and if we put something in their way we'll give up wine or meat or whatever it is altogether but at the same time we won't go around judging people who say that it is okay to drink a glass of wine or to eat meat but sometimes it is important to assert our freedoms because otherwise we can open ourselves to unreasonable judgments and we can misrepresent the gospel and that's what's happening to Paul isn't he he's saying well actually your gospel can't be you're preaching the gospel free so it can't be worth much clearly you think your gospel isn't good enough to live by so you just have to give it away for nothing it's like a lost leader I suppose and Paul said no that's not the way to look at it at all I do preach the gospel free of charge but that's because it's valued in other ways so sometimes we do need to assert

Christian freedom and we need to assert that we should indeed be able to pay our preachers if they're doing their job properly in fact the problem is of course that everything in this world is open to abuse isn't it so in the end if you're not careful you'll end up banning everything and then the fatherhood of God is turned into slavery it's like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son isn't it when the when the prodigal son comes back the father runs down the road to meet him and lays on a feast and kills the fatted calf the Christmas turkey being slaughtered early but the elder brother says look I've slaved for you all my life and you haven't even given me a chicken to celebrate with my friends and yet when my dissolute brother comes back you kill the fatted calf and the father's flabbergasted by this isn't he he says slave you're not a slave you're part of the household this stuff's yours as much as it's mine but they didn't see it that way they saw it as slavery he saw it as slavery to the father and he wouldn't go in to the celebration in fact these things actually require judgment and balance and you can look at some of the problems of laying down arbitrary rules actually

I mentioned C.T. Studd a couple of weeks ago one of the great missionaries of the early 20th century but he actually was a very rich man or his father was a very rich man and left him a lot of money and he gave it away but then he wanted to go to India and he had to beg for support now was that the right decision I'm sure he made that decision trusting God and giving thanks to God's provision but it did mean that he had to depend on other people to do God's work when perhaps if he kept his own money he would have been able to use it for that so these things can be tricky sometimes WEC has always taken that position afterwards later that people should explicitly live by the!

but then maybe he made himself a burden on others by doing that unnecessarily but then you could argue yes but these others were the rich Christian businessmen so they were being able at least to take part in spreading the gospel vicariously so maybe it was the right decision these things actually require a lot of judgment and thought what we shouldn't do is say clearly it's right for Christians to give away poverty like Francis of Assisi did or say that we need to hang on to our money because we might need it someday to put in the church collection or something like that both of those attitudes are very wrong aren't they so I've tried to summarise the argument here why is it that we need to do both these things well because if we don't assert

[27 : 25] Christian freedom then we very soon start judging each other and we start indulging in spiritual one-upmanship saying how much better we are because we don't smoke or drink or whatever it is than others and of course once you start thinking like that you start thinking like the Pharisees well if spirituality is about keeping rules then the more rules the more spiritual so like somebody once described the Victorian idea of decoration that decoration is art so the more decoration the more artistic and it doesn't always quite work like that but it's the same argument if keeping rules is spiritual then the more rules the more spirituality and we become proud of our conservative values that lot down the road they wear a jumper to preach in but we at least wear a suit if not actually a

Geneva gown or a gold vestment or something true holiness becomes replaced by legalism very easily and we make Christian life seem unattractive and slavish well not seem we make it unattractive and slavish and it's not supposed to be unattractive in that sense of course there are unattractive aspects of the Christian life but they're not supposed to be made unattractive by a form of keeping a lot of rules indeed of course that's precisely the argument that Paul is arguing against in Romans and in fact in short we become self-righteous and legalistic and we become Pharisees but equally what happens if we insist on always exploiting our freedoms in Christ always saying we have to exercise them but what happens then is that we deny or we forget that our actions impact others and we would all like to do that the world would certainly like to do that they would like to think that what we do only affects ourselves and doesn't matter but unfortunately that isn't true almost anything we do impacts other people and we put ourselves in the centre again ultimately we say that our rights our freedoms are the most important thing not the freedoms of Christ not the rule of Christ but our own rights and freedoms are at the centre and we become proud of our liberal values don't we look we don't like those stupid Anglicans who you know was it ecclesiastical bling I think the archbishop described it as we preach in a nice jumper you know everyday we become proud of our liberal values freedom from sin becomes freedom to sin Paul says that doesn't he don't let your freedom become an excuse for license opportunity for license one of those hymns said the same thing soon we make freedom from sin become mean freedom to sin and our distinctiveness from the world is blurred and we make the Christian life seem either hypocritical or just pointless if there's no difference what is the you know why have the church at all it's not be unnecessary and so in short we become self righteous and worldly so either way you lead in the end you come into self righteousness you become super spiritual you indulge in spiritual one upmanship and we need to avoid both of those we do need to assert the freedom that is found in Christ and that includes certain freedoms to do certain things to enjoy the gifts that God has given but at the same time we shouldn't do that in such a way that it makes life difficult for the community and it may well things that are good in themselves can often be abused and make life wrong for the community another example

I heard quoted many years ago was a married couple or indeed a couple who perhaps have just fallen in love may want to spend all their time together that can be difficult for their previous friends who suddenly find they're excluded from that intense relationship something that's good in itself even that can have an effect on some other people and shouldn't be abused and has to be thought through carefully there's a good example of that there's one I hadn't thought of before until I had it pointed out to me many years ago but it's a good thing so that was my summary of this argument Paul does quite a long summary actually as you can say so he talks about I became to those not having the law I became like one not having the law but to those who did have the law I became like one having the law because I'm not going to argue about a few food rules either way I'll do whatever is best to not get in the way of the gospel and in fact I've summarised Paul's I hope I've summarised Paul's conclusion here he talks about not using rhetorical tricks in the beginning of 1 Corinthians but actually he does use some rhetorical well I suppose you could call them tricks sometimes and he does it here actually if you notice there's a rather delightful series of paradoxes that he uses to make his point here he says that well actually there are a lot of them but I've just mentioned the first four he says well my boast yes I have a boast my boast is that I've got nothing to boast about and he says I do have a reward from preaching the gospel my reward is that I don't take a reward I give the grace of God away freely and he says well I'm compelled to do that actually and so if I'm compelled to do it then in a sense

[34 : 12] I don't have a reward I'm like the muzzle docks but actually I do it voluntarily as well I do voluntarily what I'm compelled to do anyway and because of that I do get a reward I get the reward

that I can make the gospel freely available to those to anyone who will listen and then he says and he gives lots of examples in this in these last few verses of chapter 9 but perhaps we can sum them up he says I use my freedom to make myself a slave to everyone that is what he says isn't it I do all to the weak I became weak to win the weak I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some I do all this for the sake of the gospel why well so I might get my reward that I might share in its blessings and so he says

I use my freedom to become a slave so you can don't know whether you prefer my summary or Paul's but that's Paul's summary there's rather clever actually but I think they make the point well that we boast the boast we have is that we don't have anything to boast about that everything is Christ the reward is that we do things voluntarily for the sake of the gospel and yet it is right also that people should be paid for it if that's the appropriate thing we are compelled to preach the gospel and yet if we do it voluntarily we get a reward and if we don't put obstacles in the way of people then actually we're using our freedom then we're saying I use my freedom to either to communicate with in any way possible to save the weak or the strong the Jew or the Gentile slave or free I won't put anything in the way of that and I use my freedom to help others so let's stop there and we'll stop by singing another hymn ending Thank you.